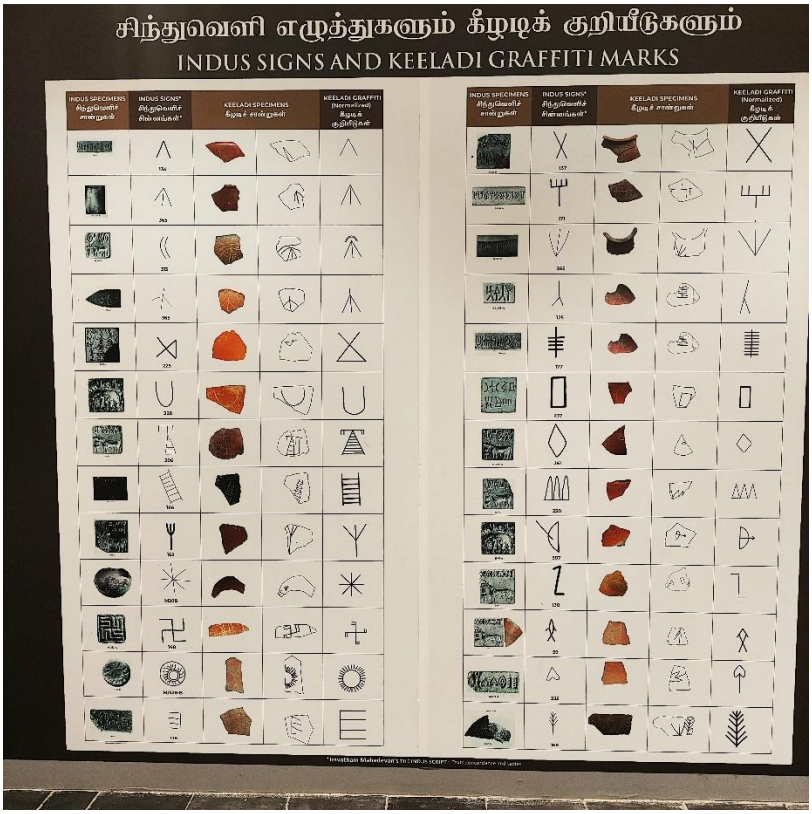
Keezhadi inscriptions and their relationship with Indus script symbols and Asokan Brahmi scripts.

There is a lot of information about the Keeladi excavation site, Madurai, and a new field museum has been built recently in that village. However, I have restricted my discussion in this article only to the issue of scripts used in the Keeladi site; details are as given below:

Keezhadi, or Keeladi, is a Sangam period settlement site, where excavations are carried out by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology. This site is located near Keezhadi in Sivaganga district, Tamil Nadu, about 12 km southeast of Madurai. The settlement lies on the bank of the Vaigai River, and it reflects the ancient culture of Tamil Nadu. (1)

Epigraphist V. Vedachalam, a domain expert for the excavation, dated the excavated remains between the 6th century BCE and the 3rd century BCE. However, the claimed dating of Tamil-Brahmi potsherd inscriptions to pre-3rd century BCE has been questioned due to a lack of detailed information in the published reports. Because of disturbances in the stratigraphy of the site — with many potsherds retrieved from mixed contexts of an ancient rubbish-dump cut as a large pit into deeper, older layers — making it doubtful whether any Tamil-Brahmi findings were from the same age as the dated charcoal samples, and the site remained occupied till the 1st century CE. (1)



The above picture shows a comparative chart of Keeladi graffiti marks with IVC symbols. The above image is from Ramakrishna Rao's blog, and the source is unclear. (2) It was probably a display board in the international conference held in January 2025 to commemorate the centenary year of the discovery of IVC. This conference was held in Chennai, Tamil Nadu.

Based on the above picture, it can be stated that all these Keeladi graffiti marks look similar to IVC symbols, which is what the display board also says. However, the Wikipedia article says there are some pot graffiti indicating the influence of the Tamil Brahmi script. The book was published by the Tamil Nadu Archaeology Department and written by Sivanandam, Deputy Director, Tamil Nadu Archaeology Department. Shows some information about this issue. Page 55 of this book shows some potsherds showing Tamil Brahmi inscriptions. (3)

The details available so far show that this Keeladi site was occupied for an extended period, during which both IVC and later-day Tamil-Brahmi scripts were also used. However, no further details are available on the internet. We have to wait for some more years to get online publications.

Which is older – Ashokan Brahmi or Tamili script

The Keezhadi excavation site in Tamil Nadu has revealed numerous Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions on pottery shards, some dating back to the 6th century BCE. These inscriptions offer valuable insights into the early history of the Tamil language and its script, suggesting a literate civilisation in South India that may predate Ashoka's Edicts. The findings indicate that the Tamil-Brahmi script, also known as Tamili, is an early form of the Tamil script and potentially older than the Brahmi script itself. (3)

The Keezhadi site has been a crucial source of information about the ancient Tamil civilisation, with excavations revealing a settlement that may have existed as early as 800 BCE. Many inscribed pot shards, including those in Tamil-Brahmi, have been unearthed, providing evidence of a literate culture. The AMS dating of these inscriptions suggests a 6th century BCE origin for the Tamil-Brahmi script, which is earlier than Ashoka's Edicts, which are dated to around 300 BC. (3) (4)

Some scholars argue that the Tamil-Brahmi script, or Tamili, was an early form of the Tamil script and potentially older than the Brahmi script. Some scholars suggest that the Tamil-Brahmi script and graffiti marks on pottery shards may connect to the script of the Indus Valley Civilisation. Research on the Keezhadi site and its inscriptions is ongoing, with discoveries and interpretations constantly emerging. (3) (4)

Prof K. Rajan on the ancientness of Tamil Brahmi

(The writer is an academic and research adviser, Tamil Nadu Archaeology Department) (Ex-professor, Pondicheri Central University) (5)

The discovery of cave inscriptions in Brahmi script in 1882 by Robert Sewell at Mangulam near Melur in Madurai district could not be deciphered for long, as scholars felt it was written in Prakrit. The successful decipherment of the inscriptions in 1924 by K.V. Subrahmanya Aiyer provided a new dimension to using the Brahmi script in Tamil. To differentiate from Prakrit-Brahmi, they designated it as Tamil-Brahmi. (5)

K. Rajan states that fixing the origin and date of the Brahmi script eluded scholars for a long time, as they were mostly engraved on non-perishable material such as rock surface, metal objects and potsherds. However, the excavated sites of Kodumanal, Porunthal, Alagankulam and Keeladi in Tamil Nadu and at Anuradhapura and Tissamaharama in Sri Lanka shed some light on the chronology of the script. (5)

Irrespective of some emerging evidence, scholars like Iravatham Mahadevan and Subbarayalu consider the date of Tamil-Brahmi as post-Ashokan. In contrast, K V Ramesh, Natana Kasinathan, M D Sampath, S Rajavelu, and K Rajan consider them as pre-Ashokan. (5)

Further, Rajan states that the picture has changed due to the arrival of a series of AMS (Accelerator Mass Spectrometry) dates, particularly from Damili yielding sites such as Kodumanal, Keeladi, Alagankulam and Porunthal. The excavations are in progress at Korkai, Sivakalai, Adichchanallur, Keeladi, Kodumanal, and Mayiladumparai, and all the sites yielded Damili inscribed potsherds in previous and present excavations. (5)

Prof K. Rajan concludes that Tamili is older than Asokan Brahmi script; only more excavations and additional pieces of evidence will answer this dispute.

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